

**Testimony of
Sidney Coffee, Executive Asst. to the Governor for Coastal Activities
For Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco**

**Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives**

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, for allowing me to speak before you today. I'm Sidney Coffee and I serve as Executive Assistant for Coastal Activities to Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco.

Mr. Chairman, I want to begin by thanking you for your interest in the future of New Orleans and the surrounding region. Additionally, I want each member of the committee to know that the people of Louisiana believe that recovery and future prosperity will require great tenacity and perseverance. That said, all Louisianans realize the size of this catastrophe ensures that we cannot go it alone; we will need assistance from our friends, neighbors and government.

Along with assistance comes an obligation: to steward those generous resources as efficiently and effectively as possible. In addition to working

with you to identify our most pressing needs, I want to assure you that the state of Louisiana is committed to making the most of every dollar.

After years of predicting the doomsday scenario that would occur if the “big one” ever hit New Orleans and the economic impacts it would have on the region and the nation, we find ourselves in the aftermath of not just Hurricane Katrina, but of Hurricane Rita as well, in what is now a tragedy of such magnitude that its economic and social ripples will continue to impact the very fabric of this nation for many years to come.

We have known for decades that the dramatic land loss occurring in south Louisiana continues to directly impact the safety and sustainability of the region. We’ve sounded the alarm repeatedly and very publicly, that the loss of Louisiana’s coastal land – what is now recognized as America’s Wetland – is indeed an emergency and that its restoration merits immediate attention -- not just because of the inherent safety it provides our communities, but because it protects the nation’s number one port system, safeguards critical energy infrastructure, and is home to a third of the fisheries in the lower 48 states.

To bring back one of our nation's most historic and strategic cities and, indeed, an entire Gulf region, is an overwhelming challenge. However, as with efforts to rebuild after the Great Chicago Fire or the San Francisco earthquake, or Dresden, which better reflects the scale of our destruction, one thing is certain, citizens and businesses must be made to feel safe in their communities if they are to return and rebuild. In a meeting just last week, New Orleans business leaders made it clear they would not return to the city without increased protection.

We are seeking support for Category 5 hurricane protection that integrates coastal restoration for region-wide, long- term protection.

Restoring the wetlands is an integral part of this long-term solution, incorporating water quality issues, reduction of the dead zone and perhaps most importantly, reduction of storm surge. According to scientists, every 2.7 miles of wetlands reduce storm surge height by approximately one foot. However, we continue to lose 24 square miles of land each year, compounding our vulnerability.

Fortunately, one of the most critically important components of our recovery plan for a long-term solution to the region's battle with nature has been developed over the past several years and is ready for implementation.

Hurricane protection must be done in concert with coastal restoration; the two efforts must not be treated separately. As we've said in the past, all water resource issues must continue to be addressed comprehensively and must be executed programmatically, not as unrelated series of projects.

In light of the recent disasters, we've been asked if the Louisiana Coastal Area plan (the LCA) now pending before Congress is still relevant. In fact, we consider it even more important today than before the storms. We may need to shift some prioritization of projects, but the plan is not in conflict with what is still needed and the basics are in tact – barrier island restoration and shoreline protection and reintroduction of fresh water and sediment into the marshes from the Mississippi and Atchafalaya Rivers.

Of course, we have to consider the conditions that now exist and adapt our plans. Our delta system is dynamic and, as in the past, we must always adapt after storm events. For example, we may not know for a while the full

extent of the landscape changes – which areas experienced permanent loss and which will eventually recover.

You have before you (and attached to the written testimony) a proposal the State sent our delegation on September 8th in response to their request for recommendations on how to address our rebuilding needs. It includes some key concepts we feel are necessary as we go forward in integrating a comprehensive hurricane protection system with coastal restoration:

- We must implement the program through a partnership between the state of Louisiana and the Mississippi River Commission, supported by a working group of state and Federal agencies that includes scientists from the academic community, ensuring that sound science and engineering continues to lead the effort;
- We must accelerate construction of proposed hurricane protection projects to withstand Category 5 storms and we must repair and upgrade existing hurricane protection to do the same. In spite of continuing subsidence of the landscape and changing climate conditions, the engineering community assures us this can be accomplished. The main-line Mississippi River levee system was

designed to provide a very high standard of protection and that high standard must be applied now to hurricane protection;

- We must implement the comprehensive suite of coastal restoration measures recommended in the Coast 2050 Plan and the restoration planning under the LCA study. Coastal restoration will bolster and help sustain the protection of the levee system;
- It is critical that we streamline the implementation process and move immediately to design and construction in the shortest practical time. We cannot simply initiate traditional feasibility studies that usually take a minimum of five years to complete. By the Corps' own admission, it takes an average of 11 years from authorization to completion of a project. If you add five years of pre-authorization studies to this, it would be 16 to 20 years before we have adequate protection from future storms. We simply don't have 20 storm seasons to wait.
- And we must have a sustained source of funding in the form of direct sharing of OCS revenues to protect and sustain vital energy infrastructure, to provide hurricane protection, and to accomplish long-term coastal restoration.

Our cost estimates are about \$32 billion to accomplish this, but it is clear this is a very reasonable investment, compared to the hundreds of billions of dollars in losses caused by Katrina and Rita alone. Sharing OCS revenues would simply allow production supported from Louisiana's shores to be used to protect Louisiana's shores and would have the least impact on Congressional budgets and appropriations.

No one can deny that our predictions, tragically, are now reality. Time is definitely not on our side and the way we address this crisis cannot and must not be "business as usual" with lengthy project feasibility and cost/benefit analysis. Surely, the costs to the nation of restoring our coastal lands and providing real safety through adequate hurricane protection have now been justified.

I cannot overemphasize how much the state of Louisiana values its long-standing partnership with the Corps of Engineers and other Federal agencies working with us to save our strategic and invaluable coast. We recognize the role of this committee in forging and stewarding that partnership and appreciate it very, very much. We are committed to ensure that Federal

funding will be spent wisely – on projects that are cost-effective, will produce results, and which meet all environmental requirements. We are not asking for exemptions from NEPA or the Clean Water Act, but we do need a commitment from the Congress and the Administration to work smarter and much, much faster.

In closing, I'd like to remind you that this is no longer theoretical. This is real. Real people have lost their lives and hundreds of thousands more across the Gulf region – in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas – have lost their homes, their livelihoods, their family pets, their photographs and mementos of their past. They've lost everything.

I sincerely ask you to keep the human aspect before you as you make your decisions – that when all is said and done, this is not just about numbers on a spreadsheet, it's about serving people just like you and me – their families and their dreams and aspirations. It's about Americans and their safety and their future. It's about the economic and human sustainability of our country. Thank you.

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